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Dropadi Bhattarai, Basanta Kumar Mahato, and Ujira Rokkai are three 27-year-olds in rural western Terai who are setting examples in their community after they learnt an “elum” or trade. They also say their lives have changed and that they are headed to a positive direction whereby they can guarantee a better future for themselves and their families.

In a state perplexed by a myriad of reasoned and unreasoning setbacks, this confidence – gleaming out of their eyes – show their determination and belief for a call to their counterparts throughout the country and the authorities concerned. It’s an eye opener to how creating jobs, in its literal terms, can change people’s lives.

Bhattarai, who is a fast food vendor at the Kohalpur Chowk in Banke, says, “The daily transaction in my eatery is around Rs. 1,500 to 2,000 (US\$25) and that’s quite a good business around here for a small enterprise like mine.”

Not to mention the meager investment.

“This newfound income has changed my family’s lifestyle. It has, for sure, improved our lives,” adds Bhattarai, who cooks and serves a dozen of varieties of snacks and tidbits by the side of the East-West Highway to the west of the Kohalpur settlement.

A school dropout, Bhattarai knows when to make hay while the sun shines. For her age and the social circumstances that she lives in, Bhattarai is a role model as she contributes to the family income, provides food and clothing and ensures education and health of her two children as well.

“I want to expand my business,” says an aspirant Bhattarai who until last year worked in the fields and knew nothing about serving food or dealing with customers.

For her and her family, the change arrived earlier this year when her husband Bhola Ram Bhattarai heard about the Fast Food Vendor Training conducted by the USAID-funded Education for Income Generation (EIG) project in Banke to promote self-employment amongst excluded youth. USAID is a state agency of the United States of America that works for the development of underdeveloped and developing nations.

The training, a 230-hour program, trained 20 young people – 16 women, for men – who met the EIG's criteria for the excluded and who showed a willingness and interest to be entrepreneurs and be fast food vendors.

“Sixteen of them now run their fast-food centers in different parts of the district,” says Anita Mahat-Rana, an economic specialist at the General Development Office in USAID/Nepal.

“Prior to attending the program, almost all the beneficiaries of the training were school dropouts and earned very little. But the vocational training has helped increase their wages. Bhattarai is one among them,” she adds.

In Kohalpur Chowk – where Bhattarai's eatery serves momo, chowmein, masala omelet, chapatti, and curry and sausages – the road splits in four directions: to Mahendranagar, Butwal, Surkhet, and Nepalgunj. Here at the crossroads, with Kohalpur Bazaar just around the corner, it is clear that street-vendor business thrives and is here to stay.

In recent days, infrastructure development, particularly of houses, hotels, and private residences the mid-west region is seeing a massive rise in the cities of Nepalgunj, Bardia, Surkhet, and Dang, all of which are connected to Nepalgunj, the informal but administrative headquarters of the country in the west.

The Nepalganj border, which feels more Indian than Nepali and unusually Islamic than Hindu, is connected to the capital with the sensibly planned western highway and a metallic domestic airstrip, both of which are backdoors to Uttar Pradesh in India merely six kilometers away. With

Lucknow some six hours away, everything here is business around the clock.

Commenting on the socio-economic opportunities for excluded youth and their new access to employment and income, Darrell L. Deppert, an official working for the EIG project at the Winrock International, says of EIG, “It has a demand-driven approach to education for income generation – creating training courses that meet the needs of the labor market and linking youth to the pre-identified employment opportunities.”

This former Peace Corps veteran, who claims to have introduced integrated fish ponds in Janakpur, adds: “The project targets illiterate excluded youth – Dalits, Janajatis, women, and conflict-affected people between the age of 16-30 years – and at least 80% of our trainees have been trained in agriculture or vocational education.”

It is understood that for any country, skills and knowledge are the driving forces for socio-economic development and promoting equity and inclusive growth. For a country like Nepal with high skill deficiency and a history of state-engineered exclusion, it is imperative to understand that Nepalis with better levels of skills would be in better position to tap the opportunities and address the ever growing challenges of contemporary high-tech industries and service sectors.

“Construction skills are in demand, and one of the major skill demand areas is carpentry,” says Basanta Kumar Mahato, who is pulling in extra hours at the Kohalpur Institution of Technical Education in Kohalpur Bazaar, just a short drive from where Bhattarai runs her eatery.

“I’m based in Butwal actually, but because of the puja, I’m back home and utilizing my time to make some extra money,” he says, taking a pause with the hacksaw/handsaw.

Like Bhattarai, Mahato says his life has changed after he learned how to use the tools of the trade. Three months after attending EIG's vocational training in basic carpentry in Bardia earlier this year, he is now skilled in construction and repairs of basic furniture like tabled, chairs and beds.

"I look forward to attend the second level of training as I want to improve my skills and engage in more complex construction works," says this gleaming father of two who is currently placed in Butwal in an on-the-job training after completing his practical skills training.

"Before the training, I was ignorant and knew nothing. I used to work in the fields but it was never enough to support my family. Today, I'm skilled in basic carpentry and support my family, and I aspire to do better and earn more as I advance in my skills," Mahato adds.

Each year, Nepal witnesses a hoard of unskillful graduates passing out of college, a large chunk of whom continues to remain unemployed even years after they have graduated. Add to it the backlog of unemployed workforce looking for employment opportunities in the formal and informal sectors.

Clearly, a shocking chunk of the workforce, especially the youth, is highly skill-deficient. The stress is overwhelmingly large in conflict-disrupted rural areas where finding jobs is more than just competition. But things could take a positive turn for the large number of youth across the country, the way it did to Ujira Rokkai of Bajura Tole, further up the highway from the Kohalpur Chowk that leads to Surkhet.

Bajura Tole is a newly settled village of Naubasta, situated 25km north of Nepalgunj. Six years ago, Rokkai, together with 30 households, migrated from Bajura in the far-west and took refuge

on the land which was originally a part of the Community Forest Group (CFG).

“Life was hard up there in Bajura, so we migrated here to the plains, where cultivation is possible and access to India for our men is easier,” Rokkai says, “Up there, we had to brave landslides and snowfalls, and the cultivation produce wasn’t enough to feed us all. We were very poor.”

But in the beginning, life wasn’t easy even in the plains, as the CFG exercised its power over the internally displaced. Three years earlier, Rokkai and her villagers were forced out of the forest reserve. Elephants were brought in and their huts were torched; and in the mayhem, protesting villagers were jailed.

“We got our friends and families released by paying Rs. 10,000 per person,” Rokkai says. “Some of us still owe debts but it isn’t really a problem now since we’ve started earning, thanks to the EIG training and a clear understanding with the CFG.”

Six years after their internal migration, life is starting to reap benefits for Rokkai and her fellow villagers. The trained women can now read and write, use calculator to do simple math, own mobiles to communicate with their husbands in India, talk about hygiene and HIV, and are in far better position to run simple businesses.

“Prior to the training, we thought we had to tear a one-Rupee note to break it down to 50 paisas,” a now amused Rokkai shares the miseries of her turbulent past. “But my life has changed,” she says. It is a voice that resonates down in Kohalpur Chowk where Bhattarai and Mahato also believe they have a better future.

Back in Bajura Tole, last season's mushroom has earned Rokkai and her villagers Rs. 6,000 as net profit, and they look forward eagerly to this season's harvest. They also seem to have earned a lot in terms of the three module EIG curriculum that concluded in September. The EIG curriculum trained Rokkai and her villagers using non-formal education techniques, and the modules have seemed to work out well.

"The first three months or the first module covered literacy and numeracy. In the second module lasting two months, the women were trained on life skills, HIV and AIDS, health and peace building, and the one-month third module was on entrepreneurship and micro enterprise training," says Rokkai.

"We have also formed a Savings Group, and since mushroom farming is seasonal, we have also set up a handloom to produce hemp products in the off season," says Rokkai. "Some of us are also into goat livestock."

Rokkai, Bhattarai and Mahato – the three 27-year-olds in the rural western Terai, offer one single perspective that is now time-tested: there is a skill gap in the country, and in order to promote inclusive growth, there is an urgent need to address the issues of skill development and employability for jobseekers.

As Deppert puts it, "Nepal and its rural youth have a unique opportunity. The EIG project includes an integrated literacy, life skills, peace-building, and entrepreneur training that provide reading, recordkeeping, and math skills for self-employment, and serves as a foundation for additional training in vocational education or agricultural productivity."

That creating jobs can thus surely change lives and education is not rocket science.

It works.

ARPAN SHRESTHA

